

Unshackled

Stories of Transformed Lives

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Chapter Thirteen

What Elmer Wagler Says Makes Sense

WHOEVER NAMED BIGGS, KENTUCKY, either had a sense of humor or expected a very rosy future for the town. For Biggs is no bigger than any other isolated Kentucky mountain town and perhaps never will be. But one of the biggest things in Biggs, Kentucky, is the Southern Highland Evangel, and that's what I came down from Cincinnati to see.

The director of the Evangel met me in his shirt sleeves.

I liked him at once. He was an unsophisticated man in his early fifties with that deliberate way of speaking that encourages both small talk and early confidences.

We had supper together and then he showed me around the buildings. He was proud of his center. "It's the mountain folk we're here to serve," he told me. "Lots of times we're all they have, closer than some kinfolk in this feuding country. We started our work right here in Biggs, but we've reached our hands out to three mountain states now; got twenty-four centers going."

When we finished our tour, evening was coming on softly as it does in early Kentucky spring. We relaxed in his living room while he told me story after story of folks helped by the Southern Highland Evangel, speaking in his slow, calm voice so that names and conversions rolled on as steadily and as surely as the low hills of the bluegrass country I had seen on my way down to Biggs that day.

Then he punctuated his story telling with an exclamation. "Sometimes it's hard to believe what CHRIST can do in a life!"

I nodded.

"Let me tell you about Elmer, for example. Elmer didn't come from around these parts. In fact, this isn't a Kentucky story at all. It begins in 1905 in Peoria, Illinois."

By the time he was seven, Elmer hated schools, he hated his playmates, and he almost hated his family. For talking was a nightmare for Elmer. His breath caught in his throat, his face got red, words piled up and refused to come out. He didn't stutter; he stammered. Word stoppage, the doctors called it.

Teachers in school thought Elmer wasn't bright. Like the new teacher in the second grade.

"Elmer-" she called the roll. "Are you present? Elmer?"

Elmer sat at his desk. He felt hot, as if he were going to burst. He struggled with the words.

"He's here, only sometimes he can't talk," a pal sang out helpfully.

"Which one is Elmer?" The new teacher sounded peevish, even if she was not. "Elmer, raise your hand, please. Is this true, Elmer? Can't you talk?"

Elmer gripped the edge of the desk. He leaned forward. "Yes-I can-so-talk."

The teacher looked down at the roll book, went on to the next name. The class tittered. Elmer sat back but he didn't relax.

His mother's cure for his stammering was simple. In her arms, Elmer sobbed out his hatred for school, for his playmates, for himself.

"There, there, now wait a minute, Son, before you try to talk."

The small boy sobbed and hiccuped.

"Stop trying to talk, Baby. Just put your head here on Mother's shoulder and be still. You don't have to talk. I know how hard it is for you in school."

"I wish-I-had-never been-born," Elmer gasped out. His mother smoothed back his hair. "The Bible says '**all things work together for good.**' Remember that, Son."

But Elmer wondered.

Yet at twelve, he made a profession of following CHRIST. His mother was pleased. "Trust GOD," she told him.

"Your affliction is bad, Elmer, but you're not the only one. GOD's Word works for everybody when we meet His condition - all things do work together for good for those who love God. GOD's trusting you with your handicap. Doesn't that make you feel good?"

"No-no-no. Let Him-trust-somebody-else."

In high school, Elmer stammered himself into a dark closet of fear and shyness. "Dates with girls-are-silly," he stormed at his sister. "I'd rather-stay home - and read." His marks were high; on his English themes he got A's. "But I can't-be-a journalist," he refused his English teacher's guidance. "I'd have-to talk to-people."

From his parents, he got sympathy and help. "Elmer, I've good news for you," his mother told him one day.

"Yes?"

"From now on in school, you're excused from oral recitation. You won't need to be nervous about having to answer the teacher's questions in class any more, dear."

Elmer stared glumly at the floor. Let everybody know for sure he was odd? "Oh, Mother-" He was crying; no stoppage in his sudden sobbing.

His mother watched him. "Elmer, that settles it. Something's got to be done. We're going to borrow the money and you're going to that speech school in Detroit."

At the speech institute in Detroit, Elmer prepared for a behind-the-scenes job. When he finished, he had typing, shorthand, bookkeeping, and he still stammered. He came home to a job in his father's insurance office, left soon for a better one in a local feed manufacturing plant.

At the feed plant, he mastered his daily clerical routine in a few weeks. Routine was it; routine work in a sweat of fear.

Suppose, for instance, he answered the phone some day to find he couldn't get the words out.

One day, his phone did ring. "Hello, Elmer?"

"Yes-yes." He pushed the words into the small black hollow.

"This is Marguerite."

Marguerite was like one of the family, a friend of his sister's, who had quit school to take care of her family. He'd seen her around since he was very young. She was interested in the activities of the church. But why was she calling him now?

"There's going to be a picnic," Marguerite told him.

"A bunch of us girls are fixing the food. I was wondering if you'd like to go."

After the picnic, Elmer asked for another date. And another. On the dates, the flow of words was easy for Elmer. He could talk to Marguerite. Marguerite listened.

But she wasn't his cure. He talked to her, but his speech was still like a hammer that frequently missed the nail.

That summer, sitting on her front porch one night, he confided in her. "I want to-talk over-something with you. There's a fellow in Chicago - a speech teacher - who says he can-cure stammering. I've been saving-my money-and-"

"When will you be leaving for Chicago?" Marguerite asked.

"Right away." Then he took her hand. "Will-you write - to me?"

"Yes," she told him. "And Elmer, besides writing, I'll pray."

Elmer remembered that promise when he got to Chicago. Marguerite writing - that was one thing. But praying?

It sounded too much like his mother and her reminder, "all things work together for good."

And it was easy to see all things had not worked together for good or he wouldn't be where he was. Alone in Chicago, still stammering, a failure at twenty-two.

Rigidly, he stuck to his speech lessons with the Chicago professor. Breath control, practice reading, and exercises, exercises, exercises.

"I'm not getting anywhere," he brooded one night in his boxy YMCA room. Loneliness squeezed in upon him. In all the world he was most alone. "Absolutely nowhere. I've still got Marguerite, but she's so far away. And Mom-" He reached into the dresser drawer for his mother's last letter. He skimmed it again.

"All things work together for good to those who love God, Elmer. Why don't you find a church nearby?"

He dropped the letter on the floor. "Go to church? What good would it do?"

The next night's lesson was worse than ever. His throat felt tight, closed. His tongue didn't belong to his mind.

"Try again, try again, young man," the speech professor repeated. "Again - the Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want," he chanted.

"Beside the still wat - beside - the still - wa-" Elmer forced out.

"Yes, splendid."

"No," Elmer declared.

"What was that, sir."

"I said no - I'm not-getting any place."

"Yes, indeed you are," his professor assured him. "Yours is a very severe case but you're making excellent progress."

Elmer went to the door. He didn't look up at the professor. "If that's all for tonight - good-night."

Elmer walked down Van Buren Street on his way to his room. To his right was the old Pacific Garden Mission. The lighted sign over the door said so.

"Why not go to church?" his mother's letter had said.

Pacific Garden Mission wasn't church, but he could hear singing inside. There was a service going on.

Elmer went in, sat down and sang, too. With music, his words flowed out smoothly; they always had. Then he put his chin in his hand, leaned forward and listened to the testimonies. George Snow, who had been a big time gambler, and others told of the liberating power of GOD when they acknowledged they were without power to conquer sin and self.

The next night he went back to the mission. And the next.

When he was singing, he wasn't stammering, he wasn't alone. Yet, of course, he wasn't one of those reformed or unreformed derelicts, he told himself. "I'm not like them," he said walking back toward the YMCA after the meetings. "But I could pray more and read my Bible."

He tried reading the Bible, usually to become drowsy enough to drop off to sleep. "The Lord-is my-shepherd, I shall-not want-, He-maketh-me to lie-down-in green-pastures." The more he read, the less drowsy he was. He was tired, he hated the whole world and reading the Twenty-third Psalm didn't help.

In February, after a bad bout with his speech professor, he knocked on Mission Superintendent Taylor's door.

"My husband's away at a meeting," Mrs. Taylor told him. "But maybe I can help you, Elmer."

"Look," he blurted out. "I'm-honest. I'm no-bum. But I - need help."

"Ma" Taylor nodded. "You don't feel you have a handle to take hold of GOD, is that it? You don't have a sin like drinking or gambling, for a handle, so that you can make a bargain, a transaction with GOD. But you still need help. You're a tougher case than an alcoholic, Elmer."

"I am?"

"Elmer, you're ashamed and you're bitter. That's your handle. But Elmer, when you take hold of GOD, when you take JESUS CHRIST into the tiniest area of your life, when you turn it all over to him, your good mind, as well as your speech impediment and your resentment, all of it, then all things begin immediately to work together for good to you because you do love GOD. Don't you see?"

"Why sure," Elmer said. "I do see - now."

That was on February 27, 1921. The same night, one of the mission men stopped Elmer.

"I've heard you've accepted CHRIST, young man. Don't you want to stand up and tell the people what the Lord has done in your life."

"I-yes - but you see-"

"Ma" Taylor knew what he needed. "Maybe Elmer would like to sing about the way he feels right now. It's all the same joy, you know."

After that, Elmer sang his testimony in the mission meeting almost every night. Then he took a longer step forward. "GOD's calling me to Christian service. Can I? Do I dare?" he battled with himself. "Yes, I do." He quit his speech teacher, enrolled for training in a Chicago school preparatory to going into some mission field, and he kept on praying.

One night he got to his feet to sing his testimony song.

But instead of singing he spoke. He spoke words that jolted against each other at first, then smoothed out. "'And he-said-unto me-my grace is sufficient for thee, for my strength is made perfect in weakness. Most gladly therefore will I rather glory in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me."

He sat down. He said to himself, "I didn't shake inside. Thank You, GOD. From now on, I promise, I will spend my waking hours, talking about JESUS."

"And GOD's power really cured his stammering?" I asked in amazement.

"The Lord gave 'grace to help in time of need,' " the director told me with a smile. "Gradually the handicap has been lifted over a period of years. Even now, he has difficulty only when he's-very tired or-unusually nervous."

His wife came to the doorway. "Marguerite," he called. "Yes, Elmer?" she answered.

"Come on in here and let's finish up this story together.

Let's tell our good friend about our wedding and how GOD called us to be missionaries here in Biggs."

~ end of chapter 13 ~
